

The tangled politics of Middle Eastern peacemaking has a rich history of unintended consequences.

Nearly a century ago, a perceptive British officer familiar with Palestine offered this bit of irony about the treaties ending World War I: "After the 'war to end war' they seem to have been pretty successful in Paris at making a 'peace to end peace.'"

And now, in support of Israel, U.S. House members passed a bill that Israel's most senior military leader believes will only make matters worse - more irony, but not surprising given the long, frustrating and sad history of Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking.

On the same day the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 4681, The Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act prohibiting economic assistance to the Palestinian Authority, Israel's chief military officer told his country's parliament that such sanctions would likely neither weaken the ruling Hamas government nor the popular support that propelled it to power last January.

Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz's candid assessment reflected an opinion within Israel's security establishment: Rather than undermining Hamas, the economic sanctions hastily lashed together by Israel, the European Union and the United States may actually strengthen it. The resultant economic strain within Gaza and the West Bank virtually assures a breakdown of public order that ultimately will be blamed on Israel and the West.

Many experts on Islamic terrorism believe the economic embargo already undertaken is apt to further alienate and radicalize the Palestinian population (and potentially the entire Muslim world), accelerating and extending the cycle of violence and potentially strengthening Al Qaeda's tenuous toehold in this part of the Middle East. This alone is enough to question the wisdom of H.R. 4681. But its potential cost is much greater.

H.R. 4681 bars U.S. diplomats from even talking to Hamas about a lasting peace unless Hamas first agrees to recognize Israel, renounce violence and accept prior agreements. While each of these preconditions to diplomacy seems quite reasonable, no knowledgeable observer believes Hamas can agree to them, at least in the short run, and simultaneously maintain any

credibility with (or control over) its more militant factions. And if Hamas agreed to these preconditions under pressure, the damage to its credibility among Palestinians and Arabs would greatly compromise (or end) its potential worth as a negotiating partner - more irony.

At this point, a careful, cautious stab at diplomacy is a better choice than the only likely alternative - more violence. The ultimate diplomatic objective should be a peace agreement supported by a credible Palestinian partner throughout Islam. Admittedly that's a long shot, particularly if Hamas is the partner. But it is not inconceivable.

Polls consistently show a majority of Palestinians will accept a two-state solution and recognition of Israel. Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyah has said Hamas could redefine its position if doing so would further the interests of the Palestinian people. He recently told the Israeli newspaper Haaretz that Hamas would enter into a long-term ceasefire if Israel withdraws to the 1967 lines, something Israel, quite understandably, has no intention of doing. But Haniyah's offer may at least be viewed as his starting position for negotiations. There is clearly a role for diplomacy here that H.R. 4681 unwisely precludes.

After a fierce internal debate, Hamas has chosen the responsibility of governing in a representative democracy. It now enjoys a great deal of credibility among Arabs and Palestinians. No question its election victory calls for extra vigilance and caution from Israel and the West. It has committed heinous acts of terrorism which all decent people condemn in the strongest terms. But Hamas, given time to change and adjust, may have the strength and credibility to break the cycle of hatred and violence on behalf of those it now represents, the Palestinian people. After all, Ariel Sharon changed. And who but Sharon could have accomplished the withdrawal from Gaza?

A number of my colleagues voted against H.R. 4681 for humanitarian reasons. These are certainly compelling, but must take a back seat to the fundamental, long-term security questions presented by the Hamas electoral victory. This situation calls for time and diplomacy. H.R. 4681 offers neither and evidences, yet again, the incompetence of Congress in the conduct of foreign affairs. The House is a caldron of passion and politics. Good soldiers can fight and talk peace at the same time. We should expect no less from politicians.

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